DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 416 481 CS 216 186

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TITLE Institutional Concerns: Supporting the Use of Internet Discussion Groups.
PUB DATE 1997-03-00
NOTE 9p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (48th, Phoenix, AZ, March 12-15, 1997).
PUB TYPE Guides - Classroom - Teacher (052) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Computer Mediated Communication; Curriculum Development; *Distance Education; Faculty Development; Higher Education; *Internet; Learning Activities; Online Systems; *Teacher Role
IDENTIFIERS *DePaul University IL; Listservs; Technology Integration

ABSTRACT

On-line learning presents significant new challenges for faculty, students, and the colleges and universities where they teach and learn. The overriding challenge for all parties is to ensure that technology is used to enhance, not degrade teaching and learning. DePaul University, Illinois, which grew from two to six campuses, expanded the role of the Office of Distance Learning to include faculty development in the use of distance learning technologies. The Naperville campus was planned as a "high tech" campus--many services will be available at the new campus principally via technology. An intensive 4-day summer workshop immersed faculty in online learning tools. It was discovered that it was probably a mistake to promote the view that these technologies extend the classroom, rather than create new learning environments. The use of technology for teaching and learning requires that faculty are given more support in the development of learning activities employing these technologies. Developing and conducting on-line discussions that result in significant learning takes time. Open-ended discussions such as those that occur in listservs and newsgroups have their place as a component of computer-mediated courses, but most learning occurs when learning activities are structured. The role of the instructor needs to be clearly understood and communicated to the students. At times she is the discussion leader; at other times the facilitator; and sometimes an evaluator. (RS)

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ED 416 481

Not Just Teaching and Writing:
Designing a Computer Enhanced-Program in Composition and Rhetoric

Institutional Concerns: Supporting the Use of Internet Discussion Groups

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The field of distance learning seems to reinvent itself with each new wave of technology. In the sixties and seventies, distance learning was usually equated with educational television delivered by cable and satellite. In the early nineties interactive video was added to the mix. As DePaul University grew from two to three to six campuses, the university decided to invest in interactive video as means of delivering education to its suburban locations. This was our first move toward distance education. Today the greatest interest in distance learning revolves around the Internet and on-line learning.

With each year more and more colleges and universities jump into the distance education arena. The reason for this is not at all difficult to discern - it is market driven. There are approximately 4 million traditional age students in the US. This figure is not expected to change significantly in the next couple of decades. Last year there were about 7 million adults involved in some form of post secondary education or training. All indicators suggest that this figure is going to increase. In an attempt to attract these "non-traditional" students, many institutions try to offer education to them at times and locations convenient to the learner. This has meant increasing evening and weekend offerings, opening branch campuses and, finally, distance learning. The newest wave of distance learning – computer and Internet based courses – offers the ultimate in education

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at times and locations convenient to the learner. If the content material is contained in texts, on the Web, and, perhaps, on CD-ROMs, and the communication takes place with e-mail, listservs, and asynchronous discussion groups, the students can participate whenever it suits them from anywhere they can log on.

On-line learning presents significant new challenges for faculty, for students, and for the colleges and universities where they teach and learn. The overriding challenge for all parties, of course, is to ensure that technology is used to enhance, not degrade teaching and learning. The first challenge for institutions is to provide the resources to support online learning. Part of this is to provide the hardware and software necessary to conduct online teaching and learning. A more intangible kind of support is having the personnel who will keep on top of what is available for online teaching and learning and keep the faculty informed of what is available and possible. In order to provide this level of support, DePaul decided to expand the role of the Office of Distance Learning to include faculty development in the use of distance learning technologies. One of challenges in this field is the sheer volume of distance learning tools and technologies. With the move toward computer-mediated learning and the use of the Internet, this is especially evident. Faculty cannot be expected to become experts in instructional technologies and institutions cannot support all the applications available. For these reasons it become important to identify the right tools for online learning.

Identification of tools runs across two dimensions. First, tools need to be matched with categories of activities. There are tools for electronic communication, tools for organizing, presenting, working with content material, and tools for developing multimedia content material, to name a few categories. Within communication there are

tools for synchronous and for asynchronous communication. Asynchronous electronic communication tools include e-mail, news or discussion groups, listservs, and bulletin board services. Synchronous electronic communication tools include chat rooms, MOOs, and graphical virtual reality domains. Each of these tools has different characteristics and can be used for different sorts of learning activities. If the institution wishes to promote the use of technology in teaching and learning, it should provide faculty with a means of learning about these various tools, their functionality, and the sorts of learning activities for which each is suited. Second, since there are many tools within each of these categories, the institution must review existing tools to decide which to support. For example, there are at least one hundred different discussion group applications. We try to carefully review what is available, have users test different packages and make informed decisions about which to support.

Since our Naperville campus was planned as a "high tech" campus, we knew from the outset that many programs would be interested in using technology in the programs they brought to or developed for the new campus. Moreover, some of the services will be available at the new campus principally via technology. For example, the library is moving to electronic journal subscriptions whenever possible so that all campuses can be served with a single subscription. Few books will be housed at the Naperville campus, but books can be ordered from the online catalogue for next day delivery. We developed a three-member team consisting of the director of the library, the director of Academic Technology Development, and myself, director of distance learning, to meet with each program planning to offer programming at Naperville. The purpose of these meeting was to help them figure out what technological resources they might use and to start the

process of thinking through how these resources can be used to enhance teaching and learning.

Another challenge to online learning is access. In 1995 Depaul University began offering a subsidized Internet dial-up service that supported full graphical World Wide Web browsers for all faculty, staff, and students. In 1996 Depaul University began offering all student free Internet accounts.

The next challenge is to provide faculty and students with the knowledge to use the technology. Here I think our success has been mixed. We have done a fairly good job of training faculty and students to use the tools. In order to show faculty how to use the technology, for example, we conducted an intensive four-day summer workshop that had over twenty faculty immersed in online learning tools. The real challenge is not providing training in who to use the tools. The real challenge is to help faculty and students learn how to use these tools for teaching and learning. In this area much work is yet to be accomplished.

The greatest challenge to faculty is to design opportunities for on-line learning that will work. As Jerry and Darsie discovered much of the literature on computer mediated learning touts this form of learning as a panacea: convenient for studnets, anywhere and any time, fosters collaboration and collegiality, brings out students who are hesitant to speak in class... Build the students a discussion forum and they will come, and they will learn. As Jerry and Darsie discovered it's not that simple. Learning occurs within structured environments. Those of us who have learned and taught within the classroom have learned how to create an environment conducive to learning within the classroom. The technologies associated with computer mediated learning present a

number of challenges for us as attempt to create learning environments with them. Most of our students are familiar with both classrooms and computers. While they associate classrooms with learning, they probably don't associate computers with learning. Most graduate and undergraduate students are where they are because they are successful classroom learners. They come to the classroom knowing how to use this environment for learning and ready to learn. This cannot be said of computer based learning environments. In the classroom instructors use both verbal and nonverbal cues to see whether students have understood a point. In the classroom we have many ways to solicit questions and to ensure that students are comfortable asking questions. This is not the case with computer mediated learning. I can see neither the puzzlement in an online learners eyes nor the "aha" twinkle when a student gets the point. One of the attractions of asynchronous computer mediated communication, also poses another challenge: anytime, anywhere, but alone. If you believe as I do that learning should be viewed at the social construction of meaning and knowledge, then this isolation poses a stiff challenge to learning. Online learning is conducted largely within text. While students regularly produce text in their courses, this may be associated primarily with papers and exams written as evidence of learning and produced for evaluation. It is a challenge to use text for interactive learning.

If we reflect some on some of Jerry and Darsie's experiences, I think we can see how some these challenges played themselves out. At DePaul last year we had a number of events where showcased instructional technology, encouraged faculty to share how they are using technology to extend the boundaries of their classrooms, and trained faculty to use some of the latest tools. Darsie and Jerry did just what we hoped they

would. However, we stopped at least one step shy of where our institutional responsibility goes. We took our own metaphor, extending the boundary of your classroom, too seriously in at least two ways. First, it is probably a mistake to promote the view that these technologies extend the classroom, rather than create new learning environments. Second, at our university, like most universities, the classroom and the development of learning activities within it are viewed as curricular matters. Faculty are presumed experts in teaching their content materials, so besides offering support for curriculum development, there is no special role for the institution to play in assisting faculty in the use of the classroom as a learning environment, or in the development of classroom based learning activities. Faculty cannot be presumed experts in the use of technology and online learning environments. I believe that the use of technology for teaching and learning requires that faculty are given more support in the development of learning activities employing these technologies.

How do we overcome these challenges? First, developing and conducting on line discussions, which result in significant learning, takes time. The online discussion, its uses, its content, and its style need to carefully planned, almost choreographed. Let's consider one problem encountered by many who wish to use technology in teaching. The students are encouraged to post messages, perhaps even told a certain level of participation is required, and they are told that any and all of their posting may be used in their evaluation. Meanwhile, the instructor has read that online discussions can lead to students getting to know one another better and as a means of fostering collaboration. The instructor wants to use the class discussion to accomplish this. The instructor is trying to use a single class discussion to achieve a number of functions and some of these

uses are probably inconsistent. While in the course of classroom discussion there are a great variety of functions served, these are achieved within a number of different contexts with different rules. When students give presentations in class or lead discussions, they will know whether this activity is going to be used in evaluation. At other times, we make the classroom a comfortable environment where students are encouraged to ask questions, even if this shows a degree of ignorance they would be uncomfortable revealing, if they thought the exchange would be used in evaluation. We have discussions where we encourage students to try out their arguments long before they are ready for prime time. This interaction is important so they can see how their views and arguments are received and so they can receive input from others as they formulate their arguments. These all represent a variety of different contexts in which we hold class discussion. Instructors and students know the different rules governing each of these contexts. The rules governing online discussions need to be more explicitly stated. In the case of the online discussion I described a moment ago, the context the student is most likely to focus upon is that of evaluation. If the student thinks that everything posted to the discussion will be used in evaluation, then students will not use the discussion to "try out" ideas or pose questions which might display some naiveté. Rather, the discussion will formal, students will be hesitant to post, and posting will resemble mini-academic papers. For some purposes, this is fine, but it is unlikely to be an environment with a high degree of interaction where students get to know each other, work collectively on their ideas, or collaborate. This is a forum for displaying what has been learned, but perhaps not for interactive learning. We can, within online discussions, create these different contexts to serve these different functions, but this

must be planned and explicit. This may mean multiple discussion groups, multiple threads within a discussion, or setting explicit rules and expectations for the discussion at different times.

The content of the discussion, the activity to be undertaken, needs to be carefully planned. What are the outcomes to be achieved? What are the instructor's expectations of the students? How will the instructor and the students know that the outcomes and expectations have been achieved? Open ended discussions as those that occur in listservs and newgroups are wonderful and have there place as a component of computer mediated courses, but most learning in our courses occurs when we structure to learning activity.

The role of the instructor needs to be clearly understood and communicated to the students. At times she is the discussion leader; at other times the facilitator; and sometimes an evaluator.